

## Ibsen's *A Doll's House* Reimagined in Guare's *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*

Robert J. Andreach

That Henrik Ibsen's theatre has exerted an influence on John Guare's theatre is a commonplace with the influence most fully developed in the *Lydie Breeze* tetralogy,<sup>1</sup> though critics note the nineteenth-century theatre's presence in *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* if for no other reason than that the 1977 play refers to the 1879 *A Doll's House* by name throughout (though one character insists the title is *A Doll House*) and quotes its closing lines. The reason for its presence has not been amply explored, however. This paper argues that how Guare's characters reimagine or reinvent the Norwegian play illuminates a particular theme. Specifically, Guare is concerned about the relationship between the past and the present in creating identity, a theme that appears not only in *Marco Polo* but also throughout the playwright's career from his early one-acts through his more recent efforts.<sup>2</sup>

In the author's note to *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*, which he began in 1972, Guare connected the play to *The House of Blue Leaves* (which premiered in 1971) by pointing out that with one exception the characters in his earlier play are self-limiting. The lone exception is Billy, who by virtue of being a Hollywood director can actualize his dream. Fascinated by the thought of that power, Guare imagined a play peopled with characters like Billy who have always realized their dreams. Thus, in *Marco Polo*, we face characters who believe they are forever reinventing themselves: inventing new selves. Yet, as the play makes clear, that is not the case for the simplest of ironies. Since the characters believe they live free from all limitations, their overriding reality, the source of their power, is the self. "What do you hang onto in a limitless world?" the author's note asks. "The answer seemed to be obvious: yourself."<sup>3</sup> That is, every time the characters undertake a new project, they do not have to redeem or transform the past because their experience of the past was that of success. They therefore turn to themselves. "The play is a comedy, the comedy coming out of each character's complete obsession with self, the ultimate structure, the ultimate source of the need."<sup>4</sup>

Yet, the contrast between the worlds of the two American plays could not be more pronounced. Set in the "living room of a shabby apartment,"<sup>5</sup> *The House of Blue Leaves* is the image of naturalistic restriction, bounded by a door secured by six bolts and a window crisscrossed by a locked gate: a prison to Bananas Shaughnessy,

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Robert J. Andreach is a New York University Ph.D. and a former university professor. His most recent books are *Creating the Self in the Contemporary American Theatre*, *Drawing Upon the Past: Classical Theatre in the Contemporary American Theatre*, and *Understanding Beth Henley* in the University of South Carolina Press series on *Understanding Contemporary American Literature*.

who when she suggests that husband Artie remove the bars assures him that she is not planning to jump, and to Artie, who wants girlfriend Bunny to leave before his wife wakes up and discovers her presence. The apartment is cramped; when Bunny tries to hide from Bananas, she “*pushes herself against the icebox*”<sup>6</sup> in the pullman kitchen. The living room is cluttered; a piano is covered with sheet music, manuscript paper, beer bottles, and Artie’s clothes. Shaughnessy’s refreshment is mundane; Bunny breakfasts on a bowl of cornflakes. Set on a floating iceberg in the Norwegian Sea, *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* is the image of non-naturalistic expansiveness: total freedom to those who have left the “real world” that is “down there” for what Diane McBride calls “Reality Heights.”<sup>7</sup> On the iceberg when not “*floating in space*,”<sup>8</sup> as is the play’s first speaker, Diane’s husband Stony McBride, the cast have no need for an icebox, and in this open atmosphere, space is not a consideration. Diane’s guest, her lover Tom, had delivered to her Edvard Grieg’s Baroque grand piano as a present ostensibly for her fifth wedding anniversary but actually for their reunion, which the two are celebrating when the play opens by having at a “*dining table . . . set quite elegantly*”<sup>9</sup> breakfast served by a country girl who pours wine for them. And when film-director Stony joins them, he is not a character who spends his days crying and Tom does not try to hide. To the husband’s question about why he is visiting, the lover is matter-of-fact. “Actually, I’ve come to see your wife. The first time we made love, she had just had a child. Your child.”<sup>10</sup> Before plans go awry at the close of Act I, she expects to leave her husband for Tom. Stony’s mother tries to warn her son by calling his attention to the way his wife constantly goes to the theatre to see productions of *A Doll’s House*, but he is distracted by other matters.

The most telling contrast, however, is how major characters in each play perceive the ideal existence. As Artie relates to his god, Billy, his meeting with Bunny occurred in a health club when he wandered into the steam room where a woman, Bunny, wearing only a towel started talking about food, an aphrodisiac for him, and he “kind of raped her.” With the towels suggesting togas, the rising steam suggesting an ethereal atmosphere, and the liberty he took with her an unprecedented freedom, he likens the two of them for that experience to “gods and goddesses” on “Mount Olympus.”<sup>11</sup> The characters in *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* float in a polar region north of the globe’s main landmasses that is their Mount Olympus, for they are Olympians: film director, performing artist, statesman, astronaut, and the like. Able to come and go as they choose, they do not have to unlock gates or unbolt doors. They can even impregnate by having their sperm shot through the sky as “bolts,”<sup>12</sup> as astronaut Frank Schaeffer does. In a play in which Frank’s wife Skippy likens her flight from the trap her husband set for her to that of Icarus, and Diane sees in the delivery of the grand piano the flight of Pegasus, the exaggeration is contemporary mythmaking as satire. Yet the characters are Olympians freed from the limitations of the physical world, including their bodies, which means they can

be whatever they want to be unlike the limited Artie Shaughnessy, who can only dream of becoming a Hollywood songwriter only until the dream finally is blasted. "You can invent yourself,"<sup>13</sup> Diane says to husband Stony.

Only one of the characters in *Marco Polo* invents himself anew and not until Act II. The others do not create new selves by reimagining themselves. They do not return to their buried pasts to learn who they are beneath the persona, the adored public self. When Diane returns to the past, it is to her child-prodigy career as a pianist, but in her recollection time is distorted. About Satie's "Gymnopedie," she says she recorded the work three times: "Once when I was twenty-eight. Then again when I was eighteen. Then again when I was eight."<sup>14</sup> Time does not flow forward because the past is frozen in her as the present. That is another meaning of the non-naturalistic set: the floating iceberg is an image of existence outside of life. When Diane tries to resume playing professionally after learning that she cannot leave with Tom, her piano teacher tells her she has been away too long to have an adult career. She is not disappointed. As she confides in her son, who she assumes is Stony, "We'll both swear we'll be different and both swear we'll change but our secret that holds us together is that we secretly love and adore the way we are,"<sup>15</sup> and the way they are is husband, wife, and lover because even though she cannot leave with Tom, she has no intention of forgoing her adulterous relationship with him. Character Larry, on the other hand, forgoes the new prosthetic legs that would allow him to be "free" to "go anywhere." For the others, he repeats a line that stunned the doctors in Helsinki: "'Doctors, why go anywhere when you're where you want to be.'" The iceberg is his "home."<sup>16</sup> Larry is the one who gets the tickets for productions of *A Doll's House*, which he calls *A Doll House*, and he is the one who plays a video cassette of the closing scene of the most recent production that he, Diane, and Tom attended.

Disconnected from themselves, the world, and life by a fraudulent Dream that promotes the lunatic notion that one can fulfill one's self by adopting a false self that does not grow organically from reality, the characters are disconnected from one another in any but a superficial way by a perverted Dream that promotes the blasphemous notion that celebrity is divinity. Frank arranged to have his wife Skippy held captive in the White House where she would deliver his child born of his bolts of semen. She rebelled and fled to the iceberg where he follows trying to persuade her to participate in the blockbusting media event: "Oh, it's the big production. You'll be a technological madonna. Me, Frank Schaeffer, I'll be a technological messiah."<sup>17</sup> Though she resists, she cannot escape a bolt or her husband's voice that adds sacrilege to arrogance. "Hail Skippy full of grace. Now you're filled with the twenty-first-century man,"<sup>18</sup> the voice intones, mocking the traditional prayer, "Hail Mary," honoring the mother the fruit of whose womb is the Savior Jesus. His language reveals his obsession with self, for he conceives of the child as his self replicated with Skippy merely providing the womb for the gestation. Born a boy

rather than an infant as a result of the catastrophically accelerated gestation, the son drowns when he joins a group of lemmings leaping into the sea.

Stony is also obsessed with Frank's self, desiring to emulate the achievement of the Arctic constellation's highest star who rose above the earth and its limitations in his quest to discover a new planet. "I will get to you, Frank Schaeffer. You are the best part of me!"<sup>19</sup> are among the first words Stony speaks in the play's opening monologue, and even before he dons the astronaut's discarded space suit, he declares, "I am Frank Schaeffer."<sup>20</sup> Since he believes he is adopted, the film director idolizes the superstar astronaut as a father figure, a combination pagan Zeus and Christian God, to whom he prays in a parody of the "Lord's Prayer": "Frank Schaeffer, who art in heaven, keep my family here."<sup>21</sup> Because Olympians such as Frank have been successful all their lives, they have a surer sense of self than do the limited characters of *The House of Blue Leaves*. They therefore want to replicate the self with its successes. Stony is the offspring of the play's most obsessive act of self-replication. The woman he thought was his foster mother is his biological parents: both of them. She relates to him that in a prior incarnation she was a man who having fallen in love with the screen idol Stony thought was his foster father had a sex-change operation, only to discover he preferred men. Realizing that she had forfeited any chance of a loving relationship, although he married her because she resembled the man he desired, she had herself impregnated with sperm she—or he when he was still a man—had donated to a sperm bank before the operation. Thus the director's biological mother is also his biological father who calls him, "My friend. My son. My self."<sup>22</sup> Hence the play's title. All of the characters—disconnected from the self beneath the persona, the world, life, and one another—are singing a solo, the title of which is "Notice Me!"<sup>23</sup> sung with greatest insistence on the new planet Frank discovered that is a symbol of the replicating self projecting itself onto the world until the world becomes its mirror.

The above analysis of how the characters do or do not reimagine themselves yields two of the play's three conceptions of identity with the third withheld until the connection between *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* and *A Doll's House* is established. The first of the two, and the most prevalent, is straightforward replication of the revered self. Straightforward replication is also the most prevalent conception of the identity of Ibsen's play in Guare's play. The first time the former is mentioned occurs when Larry reminds Diane that they have tickets for a production in Oslo that night. After the two leave with Tom, Mrs. McBride tries to warn son Stony of impending trouble: "Does any women [*sic*] go off to see forty-one different productions of *A Doll's House* if she's not trying to tell her husband something?"<sup>24</sup> By "different" she must mean the theatre companies staging the productions and the cities in which the productions take place because the play is next mentioned when the three return from Oslo and Larry talks about leaning forward at performances of the play in the hope that "tonight will be different" and the play "will change

and Nora might not leave.”<sup>25</sup> Until they see such a production, the ones they see replicate Ibsen’s play whose signature image is the door slamming behind Nora as she leaves her husband and children.

*Marco Polo Sings a Solo* satirizes Larry’s conception of a different production, for a play in which the protagonist does not experience an awakening and does not leave an arresting environment to discover the self beneath the culturally sanctioned self is not *A Doll’s House*. At the same time, Guare’s play offers insights into the shortcoming of replicated theatre; it becomes a museum of inert drama. Tina Howe’s *Birth and After Birth* is but one of many examples that attest to the relevance in the contemporary American theatre of the issue of what happens to a play’s identity as it is transmitted—mummified, revived, adapted—from the past to the present. Two couples present kinship rituals. One couple, the Freeds, are anthropologists who show slides of their field trips until the screen goes blank because the film could not register images and they—or he since she lapses into unconsciousness—continue the presentation by narrating the rituals of the Io children, which are the subject matter of Greek tragedy. The strangest narrative is that of the continuous reinsertion of an infant into the mother’s womb until she withstands the required number of insertions or the infant dies: a replicated ritual. After Mrs. Freed revives and the anthropologists leave, the host couple, the Apples, present their kinship rituals that involve the two and their son, whose birthday they are celebrating. They do not simply narrate. By acting out, they dramatize the rituals, thereby creating a new, experimental theatre, one that sometimes replaces, sometimes modifies conventional linear—replicated—theatre and one that revitalizes drama.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the multiple productions, *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* has two instances of straightforward replication of Ibsen’s play or images central to Ibsen’s play. After Larry shows a video of the closing scene of the Oslo production that he, Diane, and Tom attended, Stony argues that productions in which Nora leaves misunderstand Ibsen’s conception of *A Doll’s House*. According to him, as soon as Nora opens the door to exit, husband Torvald Helmer has another room built around the door so that his wife keeps exiting into a confined, arresting space until she accepts her life with him and the creature comforts that that life provides. Whether the argument emanates from his consciousness or his subconsciousness, he is appealing to Diane to stay with him and the standard his filmmaking guarantees, yet the point is that he appeals with a narrative of replication rather than with an experimental approach. The play’s second instance is a single-image replication. Following his son’s death, Frank decides to stay on the iceberg while keeping open the option of leaving. In order to leave, however, he needs a door because he cannot imagine leaving without opening a door. “I am not ready,” begins his closing speech, “to go through any doors, but what I will do is fix this door so when I am ready to go through a door, I will have the door with me.”<sup>27</sup>

The second of the two conceptions of identity yielded by the analysis of how the characters do or do not reimagine themselves is fantastic replication. The two instances are Mrs. McBride's replication of her self by having herself impregnated with sperm she donated when a man and Frank's replicating his self by having his sperm shot through the sky as bolts. Guare's play has one extended instance of fantastic replication as the conception of the identity of Ibsen's play. I do not include Stony's narrative of Helmer's building a series of Chinese boxes to prevent Nora from leaving. Although it is not faithful to the ending of *A Doll's House*, it is more fanciful than fantastic because it is psychologically real; I can imagine a production in which Helmer tries to prevent his wife from leaving. The one instance of fantastic replication completely violates the final scene of Ibsen's play.

The Oslo production was so exhilaratingly different that Diane bought a video cassette of it sold in the lobby that she wants Stony to see and for which she prepares him by mentioning that the actors perform on trampolines. Larry then projects onto the iceberg an image of "*a man and woman in dour nineteenth-century dress bouncing up and down wildly on trampolines, flipping over as they recite Ibsen's closing lines.*"<sup>28</sup> There are minute differences between the Norwegian that Guare quotes and that of a 1941 four-volume edition of the playwright's oeuvre, but I assume Guare used another text, perhaps an acting script.<sup>29</sup> The significant differences are in the projected image and the accompanying stage directions, which are given in English. In Ibsen's play Helmer is not excited by his wife's analysis of the sham that was their marriage or by her decision to leave. Incredulous, bewildered, self-righteous, betrayed, pleading, desperate better describe him in the final scene. Neither do the two perform in unison, whether imaged as bouncing or having a "serious talk together"<sup>30</sup> for the first time since they met more than eight years earlier. In the dynamics of Ibsen's scene, Nora is moving away from her husband's authority. Following her departure in the video by tumbling "*out of sight,*" he "*laughs and bounces high,*"<sup>31</sup> but in Ibsen's conception Helmer is not laughing. He "*buries his face in his hands.*" The miracle that Nora talked about in the beginning of her analysis of their marriage gives him a ray of hope, yet the final image is aural: the slamming of the door.<sup>32</sup> The video reverses the final images. After the door slams, the "*freeze frame*" is on the actor's "*bouncing.*"<sup>33</sup>

The argument that the video is fanciful and not fantastic because it is as psychologically real for Diane as Stony's narrative of Helmer's preventing Nora from leaving is for him has validity only for Nora's bouncing into freedom. One can even accept the image of bouncing on a trampoline, though it is not rooted in the play as Stony's narrative is, as revelatory of Diane's desire not to be mired in a messy divorce proceeding but to make a clean break from her husband. Yet the video is not psychologically real for Helmer in *A Doll's House* or Stony in *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*. Ibsen's husband does not share his wife's resolution, and Stony does not want Diane to leave him. When she tells him that she is, before her and



Tom's plans go awry, he tells her that his next project is about her and is called "Whore. Slut. Pig. Death. Die."<sup>34</sup> When she starts to leave, he runs after her, abjectly asking her not to leave. If the video reveals Diane's—and Tom's and Larry's—belief that Stony will joyfully celebrate her departure, it is an instance of the Olympians' fantastic replication of their egos imposed on reality.

The video violates Ibsen's conception in another sense. Preparing Stony, Diane tells him that he will see Nora make an "incredible bounce into freedom. Into infinity."<sup>35</sup> Ibsen's Nora does not bounce into infinity; she walks into the real, naturalistic world. She must find a place to live. Her friend Christine Linde can accommodate her but only temporarily because she has reunited with Nils Krogstad. Nora must find a job to pay the bills she will incur. When Helmer tries to dissuade her from leaving by making her see that she has "no experience of the world—," she agrees, which is why she "must try to get some" if she is to learn who she is. No authority figure—neither father were he still alive nor husband—can order her understanding, for in the tumultuous events of the few days in which the play's action takes place, Nora has come to realize that she must learn for herself how society works, which means that she must go into society. Called to account by Helmer for her sacred duties to her husband and children, she answers with one of Western theatre's great clarion calls, though softly spoken: "I have another duty which is equally sacred. . . . My duty towards myself."<sup>36</sup>

Diane, Tom, and Larry emphasize Nora's bounce into infinity because the fantastic conception of the identity of Ibsen's play corresponds to the fantastic conception of their identities. They see themselves bouncing into the infinity that is actualized in Guare's play as floating around an iceberg; rather than learn who they are, they cling to the identities they have when the play opens. Thus the audience can see two groups formed according to how the members view themselves in relationship to the past, the world, *A Doll's House*, and so forth. Both groups replicate, but the one group, consisting of Diane, Tom, and Larry, replicates fantastically. Mrs. McBride and Freydis, Skippy's wife who fled to the iceberg where she became a Norwegian domestic in the McBride household, are in this group, the former because of her fantastic self-replication and the latter because of her choosing to stay in the Olympian retreat from reality. Attitude toward leaving the arresting development for the world and self-discovery is also a criterion for membership in either group. Once Freydis and Stony's mother recognize each other from an encounter years earlier, Freydis invites the older woman to come live with her on the iceberg where she will take care of her by growing "poppies" and "hash" for her drug habit. When the younger woman says she wants to "get back to what I am,"<sup>37</sup> she does not want to create herself anew. She wants to regress, as she does by sitting in Mrs. McBride's lap.

Tom, Diane's lover, would seem to be a character living in the real world, for he is a Nobel Prize winner for bringing peace to the Middle East. Yet when

catastrophes strike Washington and he is recalled to assume the Presidency, not only is he “afraid,”<sup>38</sup> he tells Diane she cannot accompany him because his staff advises against his arrival in the capital with a married woman as his significant other. When Frank’s erratic bolts destroy the cure for cancer he was supposed to bring to the U. N., he beseeches Stony’s son, thinking he is Stony, to give him a job working on the film production so that he can hide on the iceberg and not have to face the world as “one who promises and cannot deliver.” He suggests carrying the film to the drugstore or getting coffee—anything so long as he can “stay.”<sup>39</sup> And as already indicated, Larry forgoes new prosthetic legs that would give him greater mobility because he has no desire to leave the iceberg; it is “home”<sup>40</sup> to him.

Stony and Frank are the characters in the other group. They are the two characters who change during the course of the play and the two characters whose replication of their identity and that of *A Doll’s House* is straightforward as opposed to fantastic. Frank moves his sense of identity from the fantastic to one that is simpler. At one point, he finds his identity by association with Einar, a Norwegian peasant, which he assumes to be close to Freydis. This follows his more fantastic previous identity grounded in shooting bolts of semen. The sequence is evidence that he is changing. It is in the identity of Einar that he fixes the door so that he is prepared when the day comes for leaving the iceberg. Moreover, the fact that each one’s conception of the identity of Ibsen’s play is rooted in real-world images—in Stony’s narrative of Helmer’s constructing rooms and in Einar’s fixing the door—rather than in bouncing from trampolines into infinity puts them closer to connecting with the real world. Neither group, however, does what must be done to reimagine-reinvent themselves and *A Doll’s House* for the contemporary age. Richard Foreman’s theatre is pertinent to Guare’s project. Foreman has been dedicated to going beneath theatre’s surface to create anew. The example is his trilogy.

The actors who perform in the three works do not portray characters, though the term is used in reviews of Foreman’s plays. They are impulses within the author’s creating mind. From a group in *My Head Was a Sledgehammer* rises an impulse that becomes the professor, the head of the class and the center of consciousness. But as he expends energy to create metaphors that connect and direct the flowing currents, he becomes a dead Apollonian husk who before being eclipsed wears Greek cothurni, emblematic of the dying and reviving Dionysus. Having served his function, he falls from his Olympian heights into the unconscious flux in which impulses originate to begin again the creative process. In *I’ve Got the Shakes*, a female student from *Sledgehammer* tries to forestall the descent by forestalling the acquisition of consciousness because once consciousness reaches its Apollonian peak, it is fated to fall. The protagonist’s strategy therefore is to try to balance the flow of impulses from her Dionysian nature with metaphor-making in her Apollonian nature by regulating the flow by means of self-inflicted blows to the



head. How effective the strategy is as a controlling mechanism is debatable; it is certainly painful because the third play, *The Universe*, opens on the principal impulse with his head bandaged. With a potentially incestuous mother-son relationship and self-inflicted blindness, the action invokes the Oedipus myth from Greek theatre and provokes some of the trilogy's funniest scenes and pratfalls, all leading to the impulse's decision to descend into the "flux-fluxity-flux-flux"<sup>41</sup>: a dissolution that gives birth to new impulses, consciousness, choices, and creativity.<sup>42</sup>

One way to say how the two groups in *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* err is that they fail to recover the original energy that creates plays: energy that in Foreman's theatre is imaged as an undifferentiated chorus pulsating back and forth across the performance space, colliding, falling down, bolting, freezing, pointing, and giving rise to individual impulses. Diane's group opts for style at the expense of substance while Stony's group settles for surface details. Another way of saying how the groups err is they fail to understand that the key to creating is in connecting, that the connecting summons the energy.

Encountering Frank following his adventure in outer space on the cloning planet that replicates a person's "Me,"<sup>43</sup> Stony confesses his guilt for killing a planet that was supposed to benefit humankind. The astronaut assuages his conscience by assuring him that he did not destroy the planet because he too killed it and it grows back. That Frank tried to put an end to self-absorption so obsessive it breeds replication speaks for the astronaut as do his apology to his wife, his leaving outer space for the iceberg to be near her, and his willingness to consider leaving the iceberg. He becomes a more sympathetic character as the play progresses. Yet he fails to grasp the significance of connecting human and artistic growth. Alone after his son's suicide, Frank ponders his next move: "The world. Me. The world. Me."<sup>44</sup> At play's end he remains self-contained in the Me because rather than reconciling the two realities, he perceives them as realities in such conflict that only one can be chosen. Guare does not agree. His position is that of Wallace Stevens, from whose poetry he quotes as a postscript to *Landscape of the Body*. Two statements from the opening of James Baird's introduction to Stevens's mind and art can illuminate Guare's oeuvre. "The nature of poetry . . . is 'an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals.' " Poetry "must, then, spring to being out of the tension between the individual and his world." Two more statements from within the introduction should crystallize the similarity in this issue between the poet and the playwright. About Stevens, Baird writes: "He had, as a man, to live the *real* world in order to perceive the rock upon which imagination might exert itself. The life of his art could not be an Olympian withdrawal."<sup>45</sup> Imagination bridges the gap between conflicting realities; by creating metaphors, imagination reconciles them.

The character who discovers his imagination is Stony, who learns who he is. All of the Olympians live in the past, but it is a past in which they have succeeded, for

past successes are what they replicate and celebrate. To his consternation, Stony's mother reveals his parentage. The revelation takes him beneath his public self. Until he accepts the breakup of their marriage, he wants to remain connected to Diane, and he does not want the connection to take the form of shooting bolts of semen through the skies. "Is it mine?" he asks her about the pregnancy, knowing she and Tom are lovers, and then reminds her that even after the divorce he will be connected because he will have "visitation rights."<sup>46</sup> He changes after his visit to the cloning planet Frank discovered. He came in search of Frank to project himself into the astronaut's "true self. My true father. My true son," but horrified by the screaming "mes" that spill from the plant, he realizes "this is not the me I had planned to be."<sup>47</sup> Killing them, he understands that he has temporarily killed the replicating impulse that makes the world a mirror of the solipsistic self. He stops worshipping Frank because he has to be himself, and he chooses the world because the self that lies beneath the frozen Olympian self needs interaction with other selves to develop. "I want no more solos" is his recognition. "I crave duets. The joy of a trio. The harmony of a quarter. The totality of an orchestra."<sup>48</sup>

Discovering his imagination, Stony contrasts with the other characters in the final scenes. Mrs. McBride's proposal for a party implies comedy, which implies reconciliation, since the genre traditionally gathers together at play's end characters to celebrate the birth of a new society centered in a new union. The gathering is the new society in embryo. The Olympians' new society, however, is stillborn. They do not reconcile the self and the world because they do not leave the iceberg for the world, and they do not reconcile the past and the present because they are frozen in the past, which they keep replicating in the present. With glasses raised in a toast, they "*freeze*" hoping to "*unfreeze*" bandleader Guy Lombardo "in time"<sup>49</sup> to preside over their New Century Party.

Standing apart from the others, Stony has the single spotlight focused on him. Unlike Freydis, who wants to grow poppies and hash for Mrs. McBride, Stony wants to leave the Olympian withdrawal for a ground in the real world in which his self—his "plant nature"—can grow and change.<sup>50</sup> He addresses the audience to point out that this intermingling—this new union—will create comedy's new society. When Diane thought she was going to the White House with Tom, she instructed Freydis to care for her son until she could send for them. After the catastrophes strike, she aborts her pregnancy. In her final speech, she admits that she is not living: "The clock has not yet started ticking on my life. I'll let life know when I'm ready for it to begin."<sup>51</sup> Stony knows that he must "go out into the now. . . . Into the present."<sup>52</sup> But he does not go alone. Having rejected the replicating impulse on the cloning planet and Frank as his "true self . . . true father . . . true son,"<sup>53</sup> he takes his son, the offspring of his old union with Diane, with him into the new union.

So far we have been viewing identity reimagined from the characters' perspective: how they conceive of themselves in terms of *A Doll's House*. The conception is personal and individual with similar individual conceptions forming two groups. From another perspective the conception is artistic: how Guare conceives of identity, which is why Ibsen's play is in his play. Ibsen's play, however, is not the sole artistic work in *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*. Among other works an Emily Dickinson quotation is identified.<sup>54</sup> Tom offers an absurd insight into Chekhov's *Three Sisters* in which the sisters, unaware of the phenomenon of urban sprawl absorbing surrounding outskirts, were already within Moscow's city limits.<sup>55</sup> Diane's complaint—"Listen to that bell on the mainland. It rings all night. I hate that damn church bell ringing all night"<sup>56</sup>—echoes Mary Tyrone's complaint about the foghorn in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* in different scenes but clustered at the opening of act 3.

Though not as extensive a presence as that of *A Doll's House*, these works, and particularly the second two, are nonetheless from a tradition which includes Ibsen's play, and their presence supports its presence, which is so extensive that it contributes to the design of Guare's play. The next passage invokes a critical essay on the relationship between individual works and tradition. Distraught by the loss of the cure for cancer, Tom rambles, at one point asking, "The world of Art! My God! Does it always create this chain on which every event fits in some crazy exact magical pattern?"<sup>57</sup> For the literary artist with the historical sense, T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" would answer Yes, for

the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.<sup>58</sup>

Eliot's essay then describes what happens to the order in the preceding excerpt—"this chain" in Tom's rambling—with the introduction of the new work—Tom's "event":

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity

between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.<sup>59</sup>

Guare has this very historical sense. In *The War Against the Kitchen Sink*, he relates how he developed as a playwright by studying the differences between the plays of Pinero and Shaw, O'Neill and Inge.<sup>60</sup> Invited with other playwrights to name plays they consider most nearly perfect, he named Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* and Calderon's *Life Is a Dream*.<sup>61</sup> Gene A. Plunka, author of a major study of Guare's theatre, identifies other favorite playwrights.<sup>62</sup> Plays alone do not constitute his historical sense. About the *Lydie Breeze* tetralogy, he said, "I wanted the experience of writing a novel without it being a novel—of discovering how you translate the feelings of a nineteenth-century novel onto the stage."<sup>63</sup> Plays predominate, though. He once defined a successful play as "one that generates a new play" and in the same interview said that "each play is a part of the one long play that is a playwright's life."<sup>64</sup>

In the two preceding quotations, Guare was speaking about an individual playwright's career, yet the conception of identity can encompass more than a single playwright's oeuvre. He makes the conception historical and artistic, not by replicating *A Doll's House* or by fantasticating it on trampolines but by reimagining the earlier play in *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*. The later play is about individuals so self-involved that they have abstracted themselves from the currents and concerns that impact the lives of most people and in so doing have not only constructed an environment that arrests human development but also perpetuate it. Consequently the character who wants to discover himself/herself and fulfill his/her potential must perforce free himself/herself from the frozen environment. This summary applies to Ibsen's play as well with the adjustment that first Nora's father and then Torvald constructed the environment stunting her, although she is responsible in that she acquiesced in their perception of a woman's role in nineteenth-century life. Diane is not Nora's twentieth-century counterpart because she chooses to stay arrested. Stony is her counterpart but with a difference.

Nora's defense for leaving her children is twofold. Since in his feeling of being betrayed Torvald declared her unfit to educate the children, she leaves them in the care of the family nurse, Anne-Marie, who was a mother to her when she needed the nurse. For the second defense, already quoted, Nora sees her primary duty to herself, the implication being that the children would interfere with her ability to learn who she is while learning about society. The difference with Stony is that he leaves with his son. By leaving her children, even under Anne-Marie's care, Nora risks consigning them to her fate before her awakening, a fate she seems to recognize when she says to Torvald, "I've been your doll-wife, just as I used to

be Papa's doll-child. And the children have been my dolls. I used to think it was fun when you came in and played with me, just as they think it's fun when I go in and play games with them."<sup>65</sup> Yet in order to grow and change, she must get out of that environment. By bringing his son with him to "grow [ . . . ] Change" in the quotidian world, Stony rescues him from arrested development and isolation from life. He also liberates himself from stunting isolation because by connecting with his son in the quotidian world, he too will "grow [ . . . ] Change."<sup>66</sup> Characters in Guare's imaginative world develop through interaction. Characters do too in Ibsen's imaginative world, yet by drawing a parallel between Stony and Nora, Guare emphasizes connection in the departure while Ibsen emphasizes the revolutionary nature of the departure.

By having Stony bring his son with him "into the now. . . . Into the present,"<sup>67</sup> Guare has his protagonist bring the past into the present because the son is the offspring of Stony's past with Diane. Guare also brings the past into the present by reimagining Ibsen's play in his play because their connection effects a readjustment of Eliot's "relations, proportions, values."<sup>68</sup> The focus on Nora's departure breaks with an older perception of a woman's role as plaything. The spotlight on Stony confirms a newer perception of a man's role as a single, caring parent in a world in which women work, whether as concert-hall performers or in other professions. Nora's slamming the door marks the supremacy of late-nineteenth-century naturalism while her vacating the naturalistic stage to a husband defeated in his naturalistic perception of women as no more than playthings heralds naturalism's decline as the twentieth century progresses. Stony's addressing the audience completes the decline by shattering the illusion of a fourth wall. His hands revealing two sprouting plants, in an obvious contrast with the planet's plants from which spill the screaming mes, authenticates not only late-twentieth-century non-naturalistic imagery but also the theatre's and the tradition's continuity of growth and change. Artistic works have a plant nature: rooted in tradition, the soil of the past, they both generate and grow out of previous artistic works as well as out of their creator's being.

This, then, is the reason for *A Doll's House* in *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*. Seeing its presence, we see how each play contributes not only to the other play's identity but also to the tradition's identity so that the act of critical evaluation encompasses, the poetry of Dickinson and Stevens and the plays of Ibsen, Chekhov, and O'Neill, Howe, Foreman, and Guare's plays, too, and all of them to the tradition to which they contribute and belong. To put into a slightly different context Stony's language after his discovery on the replicating planet, a work by itself is a solo to be appreciated as such. Connected, however, solos form the "totality of an orchestra."<sup>69</sup>

## Notes

1. See, for instance, John Guare, interview, in John L. DiGaetani, *A Search for a Postmodern Theater: Interviews with Contemporary Playwrights*, Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, no. 41 (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1991) 107; Michiko Kakutani, "How Ibsen Fathered the Modern Drama," *New York Times* 14 Dec. 1980: A1; Lloyd Rose, "A New American Master," *Atlantic Monthly* March 1984: 124.
2. See John Guare's interview with Anne Cattaneo in *Playwrights at Work: The Paris Review*, ed. George Plimpton (New York: Modern Library, 2000) 328.
3. John Guare, author's note, *Marco Polo Sings a Solo, Plays from the Contemporary American Theater*, ed. Brooks McNamara (New York: Signet Classic-NAL, 2002) 87. The author's note is not included with the play in the 1996 collected edition.
4. 87.
5. John Guare, *The House of Blue Leaves, The House of Blue Leaves and Chaucer in Rome* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 2002) 17.
6. 29.
7. John Guare, *Marco Polo Sings a Solo, The War against the Kitchen Sink*, vol. 1, Contemporary Playwrights Series (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, 1996) 47.
8. 46.
9. 46.
10. 55.
11. *The House of Blue Leaves* 41.
12. *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* 51.
13. 59.
14. 69.
15. 88.
16. 90.
17. 77.
18. 79.
19. 46.
20. 66.
21. 77.
22. 66.
23. 83.
24. 60.
25. 67.
26. For a fuller analysis of the play, see Robert J. Andreach, *Drawing Upon the Past: Classical Theatre in the Contemporary American Theatre*, Artists and Issues in the Theatre, vol. 15 (New York: Peter Lang, 2003) 13-24.
27. *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* 68.
28. 67.
29. For example, in the video Nora's final speech begins, "If Samliv mellow" (68). The passage in Ibsen's play begins, "At samliv mellem." Henrik Ibsen, *Et Dukkehjem*, in *Samlede Verker*, bind IV (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1941) 71.
30. Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House, The Plays of Ibsen*, trans. Michael Meyer, vol. I (New York: Washington Square Press-Pocket Books, 1986) 103.
31. *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* 68.
32. *A Doll's House* 111.
33. *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* 68.
34. 75.
35. 67.
36. *A Doll's House* 106.
37. *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* 89.
38. 73.
39. 86.
40. 90.
41. Richard Foreman, *The Universe, Paradise Hotel and Other Plays* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 2001) 67.



42. For a fuller analysis of the trilogy, see Andreach, *Drawing Upon the Past* 86-103.
43. *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* 83.
44. 85.
45. James Baird, introduction, "Wallace Stevens," *American Literary Masters*, vol. 2 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965) 889-90 and 895.
46. *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* 75.
47. 83.
48. 84.
49. 91.
50. 91.
51. 90.
52. 91.
53. 83.
54. 84.
55. 90.
56. 69.
57. 86.
58. T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Essays*, 3rd enl. ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) 14.
59. 15.
60. *The War against the Kitchen Sink* x.
61. Robert Anderson, "A Playwrights' [sic] Choice of 'Perfect' Plays," *New York Times* 14 Jan. 1979: D1.
62. Gene A. Plunka, *The Black Comedy of John Guare* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 2002) 237 no. 38.
63. John Guare, "'Living in that Dark Room': the Playwright and His Audience," interview with John Harrop, *New Theatre Quarterly* 10 (1987): 155.
64. *Playwrights at Work* 322 and 328.
65. *A Doll's House* 104.
66. *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* 91.
67. 91.
68. T.S. Eliot 15.
69. *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* 84.

